

PERPETUATION OF CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH INTERNAL DIVISIONS: BAMA'S VANMAM: VENDETTA AS A TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT

Divisions among human beings are so innate and inherent that they could not get rid of that divisive factor even at this age of knowledge revolution. Human psyche craves to master, rule, oppress and assert its authority over others and this is the major reason for oppression in all levels, in the name of caste, creed, race, gender, etc. This innate desire to overpower is discernible through the intra caste conflicts among the marginalized communities also. This paper endeavours to focus on the internecine rivalry among the oppressed communities as revealed in Bama's Vanmam: Vendetta. It also attempts to study how the upper caste people exploit this animosity between the two castes – Parayar and Pallar – and perpetuate this rivalry by exercising 'divide and rule' policy. In the aftermath of violence and loss of many lives, self realization happens among the marginalized people paving way for peace.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Internecine Rivalry, Exploitation, Marginalization, Dalits

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INTRODUCTION

Bama's *Vanmam: Vendetta* talks about the internecine rivalry between the two castes in the marginalized Dalit community, Parayar and Pallar in the village called Kandampatti in Tamilnadu. The Parayars, mostly the Christian converts start to get education and with the newly gained awareness and knowledge begin to question their submissiveness to the upper caste people. The Pallars, who are mostly Hindus willingly accept their inferior position to the upper caste Hindus and continue to serve them. This attitudinal difference is exploited by the upper caste Naickers who use every opportunity to instigate the submissive Pallars against the Parayars. Bama exposes a "true – to –life story" in Vanmam by revealing how this internecine rivalry among these two Dalit communities is exploited by the upper caste ending up in blood-curdling murders, riot and violence. The story ends up with the realization of the marginalized communities that they had been exploited and their determination to live in harmony forgetting about their differences. This realization happens at the cost of many innocent lives and their peaceful life.

Caste remains as an invincible and inviolable force in India. The most significant trait of this caste division in the Indian society is the presence of internal divisions even among the Dalits. This internal hierarchy is one of the predominant reasons for the inability to obliterate untouchability. Roy and Singh attests to this: "Untouchability is the greatest blot on humanity. ... What is most astonishing is its existence among various castes of the Scheduled Castes themselves. The nature of this problem would have been much different had the Scheduled Castes themselves succeeded in uprooting the evil among themselves first. Failure on their part to do so has adversely affected the whole movement against untouchability" (129-129).

The innate desire of human psyche to rule over others is attributed to the prevalence of internal hierarchy among the Dalits. According to Sinha, “Though economic functions and rewards are dispersed according to caste criteria, they are made to look secondary to the ideational trappings of the system in which people are made to feel inferior or superior without any reference to the level of their material possessions or earnings. This makes the problem of eliminating castes extremely difficult and complex.” (Sinha 215-216) He further adds: “Here it is the psychology of superiority or inferiority which makes the real distinction” (Sinha 216). In fact, Ambedkar anticipated the perpetuation of this kind of internal hierarchy among the Dalits. Ambedkar, who dedicated his entire life to annihilating caste, had made an extensive study on the causative factors which originated, nurtured and perpetuated caste system. He was the first to comprehend the internal divisions and disparities among the Dalits. According to him, they are “a disunited body [...] infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as does the high caste Hindu. This caste system among the Untouchables has given rise to mutual rivalry and to jealousy and it has made common action impossible” (qtd. in Jaffrelot 57).

In *Vanmam*, though the Parayars and Pallars lived together, took part in village sports and festivals together, they had quarrels every now and then. But these were petty quarrels which were not viewed seriously. They “had been getting along reasonably well together” (16). “It was only after Marraasu’s murder that so much hatred had built up between the two castes. Up to then, though there were the occasional quarrels, no one had gone so far as to commit murder.”(17) Marraasu was in charge of watering the field of Ranga Naicker. Bama presents the exploitation of the Naickers who instigate the internal animosity between the Parayars and Pallars thus: “Whereas Ranga Naicker and Palanivelu Naicker lived in peace, here the Pallar and Parayar who were in charge of watering the respective fields turned into sworn enemies. Ranga Naicker would instigate Marraasu, while Palanivelu would stir up Karuppusamy, and never a day went by without a quarrel. On top of all this, Palanivelu seems to have further encouraged Karuppusamy to be aggressive, and promised to ‘take care’ of everything.” (8) As promised he took care of everything when Karuppusamy murdered Marraasu over this trivial issue of watering the Naickers’ field. He ‘paid off’ the police and took care that no case was filed. The Parayars understood that the rich and powerful could do anything with their money. They could sense the politics of the upper caste people in instigating the Pallar against the Parayar. The Parayar woman Mekkelamma rightly says: “They are the ones who are plotting to make sure our two castes never unite. This has been going on for ten or twenty years now. In fact even in your forefather’s time there has been this enmity. I don’t know how many lifetimes it will take for our two castes to come together as friends.”(12) Whenever, the two castes tend to become friendly and close, the Naickers “plan to destroy the unity between the Pallars and the Parayars.” (15)

The old man Abraham says: “... it was the Naickers who really made us such bitter enemies.”(14) Saminathan, one of the educated boys feels: “These Pallars go about as if they are good fellows, but every once in a while they betray us.”(15). He also thinks that they could find a solution for all these problems only through education. He firmly believes that education will serve as a panacea for all caste based evils.

When the Parayar boys go to Seenivasan Naickeer’s well to take bath, they are chased away by Pallakudi Pachamalai who waters Naicker’s fields, upon the strict instructions of the Naicker. But the boys retort him and continue to take bath for longer hours. After the verbal encounter with the boys, Pachamalai thinks: “Those boys from the Christian street have become very arrogant. Their parents used to be like us ... respectful towards the landlords. Now these young fellows are raising their heads ... they are running everything upside down.” (31) The innate caste consciousness is evident in the submissive nature of Pallars who willingly accept their inferior position in the social ladder.

When Anthony, one of the Parayar boys tries to install the statue of Ambedkar in the village, he wants to involve Pallars and Chakkiliars also in the mission. He foresees this as a “good opportunity” to bring everyone together. He is optimistic that “If we three castes get together, no one in the village can do anything to us.” (58) He also successfully completes his mission of installing the statue by getting donation from all the Dalits. However, on the inauguration day, the “*nattamai* of the Chakkiliar street didn’t want to come on to the dais in case the Naickers objected to it later.”(60) Pallars also grumble that instead of Ambedkar statue, they could have installed the statue of Immanuel. As Azhagarasan rightly observes: “The focus on animosity between the two Dalit communities need not be seen as merely commenting on their internal differences, but also as highlighting how caste remains sacrosanct and inviolable ...” (xv).

The Naickers understand that the education the Parayars have started receiving makes them rebellious and even the elders who used to give respect to them now have changed. They can perceive an attitudinal change among the Parayars. So they use the “divide and rule” policy to bring the Parayars under control. They instigate the already grumbling Pallars, thus: ‘When the Chakkilia fellows are keeping their mouths shut, why are you fellows joining with those Parayans and talking rubbish about getting rid of Caste and things like that? Fellows who are scratching around for next meal ... and they are grandly putting up Ambedkar’s statue! Just because they’ve got a bit of an education they are doing all this drama!’ (61)

The beginning of “Kazhani Arts Troupe” by the Parayar youth aggravate the anger of the upper caste people. When the “Kazhani Arts Troupe” celebrates the Vaigai festival, it infuriates the Pallars and the Naickers. Perumal belonging to the Pallar community says to Lokanathan Naicker: “We can’t say anything to them. You know how it is ... when a beggar gets even a single coin he will crow about it and tell the whole world. That’s what happening with those Parayans.”(62) The venomous words of Lokanathan Naicker add fuel to the fire: “Why shouldn’t you people protest? Are they such great fellows or what? After all, they’re of a lower caste than you. If you challenge them, they will become docile.” (62) Bama succinctly presents the vicious plot of the upper caste in widening the gap between the lower castes and perpetuating the animosity thus through Lokanathan Naicker: : “... If you let this go on, they’ll sell off ... finish off Kandampatti itself. You people have to take the lead and do something. Why don’t you get your street fellows together and talk to them about it?” (63)

When this conversation is overheard by Chinnamma, the Parayar woman, she curses this upper caste politics. She says: “Jealous fellows! Those Naickers keep on goading them, and these Pallans just dance to their tune.” (63) She spreads this to everyone in the village: “The Naickers are inciting the Pallans and goading them ... they are intent on making them attack us.”(63) But the Parayar people could sense their own flaw: “If a village is split into two, only the mischief-maker will celebrate. It is very true. Instead of being sensible and cooperating, the Pallans and Parayans are confronting one another with weapons drawn. Naturally the other Caste people are only too delighted to stand by and watch.”(63)

The exploitation of this internecine rivalry reaches its heights when a trivial mango theft by a Parayar boy is blown out of proportion by the rival group resulting in the loss of many lives on both sides and gruesome atrocities on women and children. Bama brings before us the horrendous scenes of a riot-hit village and the mortification endured by the oppressed in the hands of the rich and powerful. After a tormenting period of bloodshed, angst and trauma, the “spirit of vendetta” (131) among the Parayars and the Pallars gets subdued. They could no longer bear a harrowing life caused due to fear, anxiety, and irreparable loss. They yearn for peaceful life which would be possible, they realize, only if they live together in harmony. They understand that, “What’s past is past. ... So let’s trust one another and try to get along together.

We must be on our guard in case anyone tries to provoke us and create enmity between our castes” (130). With this determination and united strength they are able to win the Panchayat election much to the disappointment of the upper caste people. This newly gained success strengthens their conviction to live united for ever and not to yield to the instigation of the upper caste people.

Malini Seshadri rightly says: Though *Vanmam* talks about the events happening among the people of a small village in a state in India, “it is a microcosm of a bigger world, a sort of inset to the big picture. Intra-Dalit rivalry leading to animosity, the deft manipulation of emotions and prejudices by upper caste landlords ... this is a cautionary tale” (x). The events narrated in *Vanmam* remains as a standing testimony to the ingrained caste consciousness among the people and the innate craving of the human psyche to master and oppress the weak, thus trying to perpetuate the divisions.

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